1999

American Technology as Cuisine Prevention

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Traditionally, food brings people together. People use special foods to celebrate religious festivals and joyous occasions and to mark religious practices. In the United States, however, food itself is not really the reason why people gather, celebrate, or worship. We must examine how food is used to bring communities together to discover why this does not happen in our country. I use my observations of eating patterns at Lehigh University as a microcosm of the United States. These observations, along with the history of food-related technology, demonstrate why America has no cuisine.

We must first define the word "cuisine." Sidney Mintz, author of *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom* and one of the foremost anthropologists studying food, suggests that cuisine is embedded into the fabric of a culture. A cuisine cannot exist unless everyone in the community eats it and talks about it. Cuisine is a part of daily interaction with others that joins people in a common experience (Mintz 1996, 117).

Mintz looks to the history of the United States to examine food consumption and developing diets. He points out that diets differed according to location and previous food habits of immigrants. Immigrants were primarily European in origin and came to the United States to take advantage of the economic mobility and explore the ever-expanding frontier. The pressure to "become American" and be like everyone else meant that the children of immigrants wanted to assimilate by eating hamburgers and hot dogs (Mintz 1996, 108, 111-112).

The idea of assimilation is rather broad, but Mintz describes it as people behaving in the same way and eating the same foods. Pretty soon education, media and a changing lifestyle influenced the food standards that immigrants brought from their original country and their old culture was forgotten in an effort to be American. Mintz argues, however, that conformity of food habits brings the community together sociologically but not necessarily culturally, which is key in forming a cuisine (Mintz 1996, 112-113).

One may argue that regional cuisines collectively make up a national American cuisine. But Mintz, again, takes issue with this and explains that regional cuisines are

just that – foods made with local ingredients and prepared in the style of that region. They cannot be successfully moved to a different area and still be true to their original form. Sometimes ingredients are substituted if they are not native to that region or cheaper ingredients may be more readily available. As a result, regional cuisines are changed, sometimes beyond recognition, and there is still no national cuisine (Mintz 1996, 114-115).

While Mintz's definition of cuisine may seem restrictive, it works rather well for other cultures and peoples. The Iteso of Kenya greet each other and inquire about health and any news. In addition, they ask whose beer they have had and what they are cooking that day. It is just a part of their culture to inquire about food just as it is about health, which is a perfect example of food linking people together in a community. Where the Iteso eat and how the food is cooked are very important and give meaning to the meal (Kuper 1977, 101-102). The Jorai people of the Vietnamese Highlands do not allow outside interruptions while eating. There is no talking or drinking during the meal and instead partake in this between meals (Kuper 1977, 163). A group of Panamanians commented to a visiting anthropologist that his pregnant wife would bear a Panamanian looking child because she was eating food typical to their culture (Kuper 1977, 134). These are a wonderful illustrations of how embedded food is in some cultures; there is a link between what a person eats and who they are. These cultures have cuisines – they talk about it in everyday discourse, they cook and eat in ways to give different meanings to the meals, they eat without distraction and they identify who they are by the foods they eat. Without a doubt, cuisine plays an important role in connecting people to their communities.

If people are interested in food and concerned about it, then I should be able to find this cuisine anywhere Americans eat – even at Lehigh University. To see if Americans have a cuisine in Mintz's terms, I observed faculty, staff, and students eating at the Classic Cup in Rauch and at the tables near the vending area in the Maginnes Hall lobby.

My observations of students and faculty at Rauch and Maginnes leads me to agree with Mintz that America does not have a cuisine. While there are plenty of tables and chairs in both buildings, not many people sat at them to enjoy their meal. I focus primarily on Rauch because it has a wider variety of food than Maginnes, which only has vending machines. Rauch also has vending machines but I found most people purchased food at the "Classic Cup," a cart which provides sandwiches, soups, bagels, muffins, snacks, candy, coffee, and drinks. Of sixty-seven people who purchased items at Classic Cup during my observations, only eight sat down to eat. Of these eight, only one person sat down and just ate – he did nothing else besides eating. The other seven either studied, read or talked to friends about topics other than the food they were eating. Although I did not follow people to see where they ate the food they bought, I imagine that they ate it on the way to class, during class, or while studying at the tables upstairs. The food was not being eaten for any other purpose but refueling. And that does not constitute a cuisine.

It may be true that most of the students and faculty eat the same type of lunch: sandwich/salad, chips and drink. But does that conformity create a cuisine that links a community together culturally? Mintz does not think so and neither do I. Most students just want to grab a quick lunch and this practice will no doubt continue throughout their lives. It's not uncommon for business people to have a working lunch and an hour later have no idea what they ate. The point is that a cuisine is not part of our culture. Time is crucial and eating is not important enough in the American mind to make it a priority (Mintz 1996, 121).

As part of studying food and eating habits at Lehigh, I, along with the others in my research group, interviewed Andy Palco, the Executive Chef at the University Center. In answering our questions, he explained that his menus touch on a variety of cuisines such as Italian, French, and Mexican. Again, how can a compilation of cuisines make an American cuisine? It cannot. The cuisine has to be sewn into the fabric of a community, linking its members, and taking an active role in their lives (Mintz 1996, 117).

Looking to the past may aid our understanding of the way food evolved into a quick, mechanical event rather than a communal, uniting experience. The Puritans thought that paying attention to the quality of food would be too indulgent. Spending time at the dinner table and relaxing with family after a meal would serve no purpose and they feared it would encourage sloth and gluttony (Root and de Rochemont 1981, 315). Later, pressure to become American and the technology that simplified food preparation meant that people paid even less attention to cuisine.

The late 1800s saw changes in household cooking with the development of cooking schools and, later, classes for women about home economics and other household matters. Industrially produced foods were seen as modern, scientific, and pure. Because these foods are made in factories, they are uniform and certain. And this uniformity was a good thing; an early home economist preferred American cheese to foreign cheeses because the American product processed in a plant would be the same everywhere while foreign cheese would differ from one batch to then next and, be therefore, unsatisfactory (Shapiro 1986, 201). Women even preferred canned vegetables to fresh because the canned vegetables were not being handled and would not be exposed to a dirty kitchen like fresh vegetables are. Certainty and predictability was every scientific cook's desire for her kitchen and meals (Shapiro 1986, 203-206). The goal for the domestic scientist was to understand how each ingredient acts and what to expect when mixed with others in an effort to aid digestion. Rather than emphasizing taste, they wanted to provide nourishment as efficiently as possible (Shapiro 1986, 71-83, 225-229).

Scientific cooking gave women control over their kitchen (Shapiro 1986, 84). Graphs and charts were designed to show calorie and nutrient distribution and allow wives and mothers to plan meals for the week (Shapiro 1986, 209). Rather than taste, presentation of food was important and soon vegetables were shaped into flow-

ers and color-coordinated meals, such as red and white for Valentine's Day, became popular (Shapiro 1986, 83). Scientific cooking may have led to efficient meals but these meals could not be considered cuisine primarily because taste was not an important factor and it was too mechanical. A monotonous diet provides certainty, but differences in foods, due to the aging process or weather, challenges the cook and demands thought when planning a meal. It may even provoke conversation.

Efficiency and certainty in cooking may lead to nutritionally balanced meals and certainty may avoid ruined meals but do they contribute to cuisine? Factory produced items and prepared foods meant that cooks had nothing to contribute to the foods; they could not add their cultural experiences and heritage to the meal. Improvements in food production, along with the desire for efficiency, simply reinforced the American peoples' tendency to view food solely as refueling, not as an ingrained cultural aspect of one's life. If a cuisine had been established early on, then technology such as canning would not have profoundly affected it. However, a cuisine was not originally established because of the Puritan attitude toward food. Americans might have developed a cuisine long ago when time was not as crucial in everyday life and if Americans considered food important enough to invest the time in creating a cuisine. However, technology impeded and ultimately destroyed the limited progress already made in the development of an American cuisine.

The Civil War helped popularize canned foods. While canned vegetables and fruits were available earlier, the manufacturing process was slow and the product expensive. With the development of the canning technology, canned foods became cheaper and more widely available. Soldiers relied on the canned foods during the war and expected to eat these foods at home. People began experimenting with canning and soon ketchup, pickles, soups, horseradish, and cheese were being canned and sold. Eventually the technical problems in canning beef were overcome and canned beef became available to the consumer. Canning allowed people access to foods not in season or not locally available but it also turned cooking into a simple chore, one not requiring much thought or preparation (Root and de Rochemont 1981, 189-191, 210).

Along with the changes in food production on an industrial level were changes in the technology for food preparation in the home. Wood stoves were replaced with coal burning stoves and, eventually, gas and electric stoves. The new fuels were an added expense and this changed people's cooking. The high cost of the cooking fuels meant that people did not keep the stove going all day which eliminated what was virtually a free meal, the stews created from left-overs that cooks all day. The increase in cost meant that meals that took less time to prepare. The quality of cooking and diet changed since a pork roast would take longer to cook than a steak (Root and de Rochemont 1981, 222-223).

As the number of stores and bakeries increased, as well as the cost of home cooking fuels, fewer women thought it was worthwhile to make their own breads and cakes. Bakeries and cake mixes provided these items and they were modern, convenient,

and "scientifically" prepared (Root and de Rochemont 1981, 225-226; Shapiro 1986). I am convinced that technological advances increased the use of the words "convenient" and "easy" in everyday American conversation. Technology, while making cooking easier, affected the quality of the food and, in some cases, increased the costs.

All of these come together with the rise of fast foods. In the early 1800's, trains would only stop for fifteen minutes for the train and the passengers to refuel. Restaurants in train stations provided the original fast foods. In the work place as well, employees were "on the clock" and had to be eat within the allotted lunch break, sometimes as short as fifteen minutes. Food had to prepared and eaten quickly. Initially, entrepreneurs brought food carts to sell lunches to the workers. These eventually evolved into diners and cafeterias. (Root and de Rochemont 1981, 317-318).

America began with a pragmatic attitude towards food as fuel and a wariness about indulgence in the pleasures of the table. There was the potential to develop an American cuisine around corn, beef, and pork as core ingredients. However, the negative attitude towards food along with canning, stoves, pre-processed foods made this difficult. Now meals are associated with being quick, easy, and convenient rather than community, opinions, and culture (Mintz 1996, 117). Technology as well as the "scientific" attitude towards food, meals, and digestion (Shapiro 1986) worked together to obstruct the development of an American cuisine.

Beginning with the limited pleasures of the Puritans, followed by the calculated blandness of scientific cooking and, finally, the instant gratification of fast food, Americans were not able to develop a cuisine. This brings us back to the students at Lehigh who grab a quick bite for lunch and eat it on their way to their next activity. Unlike the Jorai and Iteso, our food consumption is an afterthought at best or, at worst, an inconvenience. Although the development of an American cuisine was once a possibility, there is no hope now as technology continues to advance and as business, convenience, and time saving become priorities. The possibility of an American cuisine has disappeared.

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